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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S ZAMBOANGA VISIT HIGHLIGHTS ROBUST
US-PHILIPPINES SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT PARTNERSHIP

¶1. SUMMARY: During a May 31 and June 1 visit to Zamboanga City, the Ambassador attended the opening of the 2007 Cooperation Afloat Readiness And Training (CARAT) Exercises and presided over the donations of a USAID-built suspension footbridge and 42,000 textbooks. She attended a business and government roundtable focused on efforts at improved tax collection and witnessed the benefits of an offshore island's solar-powered electrification. A reception on the USS Harper's Ferry brought together local political and social leaders while the ship's crew donated sports equipment, rice and school supplies to an elementary school. Media coverage was extensive and highly positive. End Summary.

Background

¶2. Zamboanga City is a busy international port with strategic importance in the southern Philippines and Sulu archipelago as a center of government and commerce. It is the fifth largest city of the Philippines with a population of over 850,000 and an economy driven by fishing and agricultural exports. The city is home to the Western Mindanao Command of the Philippine Armed Forces where Joint Special Operations Task Force - Philippines (JSOTF-P) is co-located. The political and cultural dynamics of the area are complex and conflict has long been a part of the social fabric. Recently the city and region have benefited from the strong cooperative relationships of JSOTF-P along with those of USAID that helped to improve infrastructure, increase economic growth, and lay the foundation for peace and prosperity in this often troubled part of the Philippines.

2007 Cooperation Afloat Readiness And Training

¶3. Three participating U.S. Navy ships exchanged personnel with their Philippine counterparts over the 11-day 2007 CARAT exercises. CARAT conducted a symposium on maritime security, amphibious and boat raid training, a diving exercise, and a command post and staff exercise.

¶4. The Ambassador and the USS Harpers Ferry hosted a shipboard reception for 75 local political and civic leaders in Zamboanga City. Local leaders were thrilled to board a US Naval vessel, and many turned up more than an hour early to engage the ship's crew, which included a large percentage of Filipino-Americans.

USAID GEM Suspension Footbridge

¶5. Zamboanga City Mayor Celso Lobregat proudly joined the Ambassador in the inauguration of a pedestrian footbridge that USAID's Growth with Equity in Mindanao-2 (GEM-2) Program built to connect an isolated community to the center of the city. The entire community turned out for this event, waving US flags, while Mayor Lobregat

gave a heartfelt speech thanking the USG.

Good Governance

¶6. In the two years since it joined the Transparent and Accountable Governance (TAG) Project, co-sponsored by USAID and the Asia Foundation, Zamboanga City has been able to increase its business tax collection by almost 300%. In a roundtable discussion with the Ambassador and the Mayor, local officials and businesspersons cited the benefits of improved governance for the entire city population. Improved efficiency and reduced steps needed to open a business were mentioned as important benefits of the program.

Book Donation

¶7. To highlight USAID's Education Awareness Support Effort (EASE) Program--which works through a partnership with GEM-2, the U.S. Brother's Brother Foundation, the Philippine National Book Development Board, and local schools--the Ambassador and Mayor Lobregat visited a local university to present over 42,000 textbooks. Nearly 100 school principals from throughout Mindanao attended this event. EASE donates textbooks to 132 schools throughout the conflict-affected areas of Western Mindanao, an average of 500 books per school, through a matching grants system.

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AMORE Pangapuyan Island Electrification Project

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¶8. The Ambassador journeyed by rigid-hulled, inflatable boat to the remote Pangapuyan Island to visit a USAID-funded electrification site. Since its inception in 2002, the Alliance for Mindanao Off-Grid Renewable Energy (AMORE) Project has provided electrical power to over 350 villages throughout Mindanao. Thanks to AMORE, Pangapuyan Island's 30 homes, school buildings, and mosques now have solar-powered electricity. The addition of lights to homes with school-age children and a public address system for the call to prayer were two obvious changes that AMORE brought to the island. In an especially touching moment, the Imam of the local mosque invited the Ambassador inside, and then presented her with his own well-worn copy of the Koran.

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COMREL - USS Harpers Ferry Sports Equipment Donation

9. The crew of the USS Harpers Ferry partnered with members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, local organizations, community members, USAID personnel, and US military personnel conducted several community relations (COMREL) projects. The Ambassador visited a community relations event at Boalan Elementary School during which the crew donated sports equipment and Project Handclasp school supplies.

Media Coverage

¶10. Both national and local media - including television, radio, and newspapers - extensively covered these events, underscoring the helpful role that the USG continues to play in improving the lives of ordinary citizens in Zamboanga City and elsewhere in Mindanao.

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